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Interview with Artist Rob Shetterly

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Interview with Artist Rob Shetterly

Rob Shetterly came to Maine in 1970, as part of the back-to-the-land movement. He and his family homesteaded in a cut-over lot in Gouldsboro, living off the grid for 11 years. During this time, when he wasn't digging clams, working in the sardine cannery, cutting wood, building the house, or growing vegetables, he was teaching himself how to draw and paint. He had no formal training. In the mid-1970s, he began drawing for the farm and garden magazine *Farmstead*, then for Rodale Press. He drew the editorial drawings for the *Maine Times* for 12 years. His artistic ambition was to be a surrealist, that is, to create visual metaphors for the issues he thought most important. He brings that sensibility to *Maine Policy Review* covers.

How did you get started creating the covers for Maine Policy Review?

In 1997, *MPR* hired the design firm Designwrights in Blue Hill, Maine, to redesign the journal and covers. Designwrights asked me to come up with some ideas for sample covers, and I've never looked back.

Can you tell us a bit about how you come up with a cover?

I think about the major concerns to be explored in the issue then read some of the articles. I find one that I think will be fun and challenging to represent visually and start making sketches. It's a process of play and free association. Some come quickly, others not. The danger is that metaphors that seem obvious to me may not be obvious to a general audience.

What do you seek to represent by the cover?

For the best covers, I hope to extend thinking on a social issue, not just illustrate an idea. And, if I can do that, I try to challenge the viewer a bit to think in a different way. I try to engage the viewer by being somewhat witty. I usually think that if the cover amuses me, it will amuse others.

We often hear from readers that they find your covers interesting and inspiring. Occasionally, a reader is concerned about a cover. How do you respond to this?

I'm very pleased to hear when readers like the covers, but it's more important for me to hear when I have offended someone or been obtuse. My goal is not to offend or confuse. As I said, I like to challenge, but I don't want to hurt or baffle anyone. When someone is disturbed by a cover, I go back to it and look for what I missed. It's very easy for me to think a metaphor is saying one thing and not realize it may say the opposite, too. I try, then, on the next cover, to be more careful. I think, though, that misunderstandings are inevitable. My art is subjective, comes out of my experience, and, for me, needs to be a little risky.

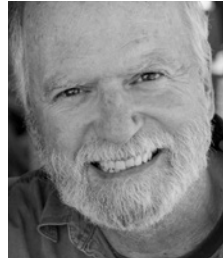
Do you have a particular favorite MPR cover?

It is hard for me to choose. But these are my favorites:

- Fall/Winter 2004—A dissolute Uncle Sam with his fingers crossed behind the head of an indigent person.
- Winter/Spring 2012 — A perplexed man, modeled on Rodin's *Thinker*, who holds a double-ended harpoon that has an impaled fish and duck on one end and a redwood tree on the other. The cover is meant to reflect the quandary of having taken too much from nature.



- Summer/Fall 2014—A blue Democratic donkey and a red Republican elephant both happily eating away from the same leafy dollar sign as a reflection of what passes for bipartisanship.
- Fall 2016—A distressed Pinocchio submerged in rising sea water, only the tip of his very long nose above water, with the last polar bear balanced on it. Pinocchio's hair is a presidential orange.



Robert Shetterly lives and paints in Brooksville, Maine. More information about him and his art is available on his website: <https://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/>

Is there any connection between your other projects and MPR covers?

Definitely. The project I've been working on for 17 years, the *Americans Who Tell the Truth* portrait series, is all about issues of social, economic, racial, and environmental justice. Same as *MPR*. (Although my politics may be a little left of *MPR*.) In fact, my portrait of Margaret Chase Smith was used on the cover of *MPR*. The portraits implicitly pose questions: What is our true history? What is that history in relation to our ideals? Who has worked to make those ideals available to all people? Who has resisted that? Why? How does change happen? How should we be living if we want to survive in a healthy fashion on this planet? What are the prerequisites for a healthy democracy?

Where can interested readers see your paintings and/or find more about your art?

The best place is the website. All the portraits are there (except the ones I'm still working on), along with bios and our educational project for middle school students all across Maine, the Samantha Smith Challenge. Also some longish artist's statements about why I'm doing this work.

Anything else you'd like to add?

I think *Maine Policy Review* is a great publication, and I'm honored to have been associated with it for so long. 🐟